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Group Effectiveness Research Laboratory

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA, ILL.

LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE AND LEADERSHIP PERFORMANCE — ANOTHER HYPOTHESIS SHOT TO HELL

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TECHNICAL REPORT NO. 70 (68-15)
DECEMBER, 1968

Communication, Cooperation, and Negotiation in Culturally Heterogeneous Groups
Project Supported by the Advanced Research Projects Agency, ARPA Order No. 454
Under Office of Naval Research Contract NR 177-472, Nonr 1834(36)

FRED E. FIEDLER AND HARRY C. TRIANDIS
Principal Investigators

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Another Hypothesis Shot to Hell

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Abstract

Data from three experiments and 385 managers and supervisors of task groups in five different organizations were used to test the hypothesis that number of years of supervisory experience will correlate positively with leadership performance as measured by group productivity. None of the experimental tests, and none of the seven field studies supported this hypothesis. In fact, the median correlation for independent samples between years of supervisory experience and leadership performance was $-.13$. These results are discussed in terms of their implications for leadership theory and management selection practices.

LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE AND LEADER PERFORMANCE -

ANOTHER HYPOTHESIS SHOT TO HELL¹

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Most managers, military commanders, and government officials would unquestionably subscribe to the statement that leadership experience is a most desirable, if not indispensable qualification for effective leadership performance. Hence, we expect a man to serve in a lower supervisory job before moving up to higher managerial positions. Most organizations, such as the military forces and civil service, recommend or prescribe a minimum of time which a man must serve in a particular position before he can be considered for promotion. And most advertisements and recruiters for top management positions stress previous executive experience as a prerequisite. Yet, a survey of the literature and relevant abstracts revealed no studies which directly addressed themselves to a test of this firmly held assumption. The present paper presents a series of studies which deal with this problem.

Leadership effectiveness will here be defined in terms of the group's performance of its major assigned task. The assumption, spelled out in greater detail elsewhere (Fiedler, 1967, pp. 9-10) is that we must judge the ability of a leader by the performance of his group. Thus, we must judge an orchestra conductor by how well his orchestra plays rather than by his ability as a musicologist or the elegance with which he waves his baton, or even the happiness and contentment of his musicians. Likewise, the criteria of group performance will here be defined by the way in which the group accomplishes its major assigned tasks or organizational functions.

These tasks might extend over a period of 15 minutes or over a period of several months or years. The point is, however, that we shall utilize the organizational definition of task accomplishment. We grant that this may well differ from an informal definition by members of the group which might set as its goal the personal happiness of its members, or even the frustration of the organization's purposes.

The major hypothesis was, of course, that the amount of leadership experience is correlated with group performance. While only one of the studies was conducted specifically for the purpose of testing this hypothesis, a number of other investigations enabled us to relate leadership experience and leadership performance.

The study which first drew our attention to the problem dealt with 32 Farm Supply Companies (Godfrey, Fiedler, & Hall, 1959). The results indicated that the general managers who had been longer with their company also had a higher company net income. This finding was, however, difficult to interpret since (a) interviews with members of various boards of directors, as well as the central office staff, indicated that performance measures were made available to the boards of directors each year, and (b) that the poorly performing managers tended to be fired or eased out while the effective managers were induced to stay by means of salary raises and bonuses. We recently decided to pursue this question further in light of available data from other studies.

The Belgian Navy Study

The hypothesis relating leadership experience and performance could be tested formally in the context of a well-controlled experiment conducted in cooperation with the Belgian navy. This experiment was described in detail

in a previous paper (Fiedler, 1966) and we shall here review only the pertinent features of the study.

The experiment involved 240 recruits and 48 career petty officers. These subjects were tested on intelligence, a leadership style score (LPC), as well as on bi-lingual ability since French as well as Dutch-speaking men participated in the study. The men were then assigned to 96 three-man groups. In 48 groups the appointed leaders were petty officers, in the other 48 groups the appointed leaders were recruits. The petty officers had received two years of petty officer candidate school which provided technical and military leadership training. Upon graduation, these men typically enlist for a twenty-year term. The average age of these petty officers was 29.5 years and the average time in service after graduation from petty officers school was 9.8 years. In other words, at the time of the study these men had had two years of training and nearly ten years of leadership experience.

The recruits had been in military service no longer than six weeks at the time of the study. Their average age was 20.2 years and most of the men had come from secondary schools or unskilled and semiskilled jobs.

The three-man groups were given four tasks: (a) to write a recruiting letter urging young men to join the Belgian navy as a career, (b) to find the shortest route for a ship which must call at ten ports, (c) to find the shortest route through 12 ports, and (d) to teach the group members without verbal communication how to disassemble and reassemble a .45 cal. automatic pistol. The median intercorrelation among these four tasks was .14 with a range of .03 to .20. Thus, these tasks could be considered independent. The first three tasks were quite reliable in terms of

inter-rater agreement. (.86 and .92 for the letter writing task and .86 to .95 for the routing tasks. The estimated correlation between the performance of the two members in assembling the pistol was less, namely .52.) The tasks were designed with the assistance of Belgian navy officers and most of the Ss, interviewed after the experiment, felt that these tasks were reasonable and fair.

Petty officers and recruit leaders were carefully matched on intelligence and leadership style (LPC). Subsequent questionnaire responses showed that the petty officers tended to be significantly more ego involved and motivated to perform well in these tasks than were the recruits.

The results of this study showed no significant differences between groups led by petty officers and enlisted men on any of the four tasks. The hypothesis was, therefore, not supported that leadership experience correlates with leader performance (Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

A second analysis of these data involved the correlation between the amount of the petty officers' leadership experience and group performance. The number of years of experience as a petty officer ranged from one to 25 years. The years of experience were then correlated with group performance on each of the four tasks (Routing I, Routing II, Recruiting, Pistol Assembly). This analysis was, of course, based on only the 48 groups with petty officer leaders. The correlations for the four tasks were, respectively, .08, .13, -.05, and .12, (N = 48). None of these is significant.

The Military College Study

Because the results from the Belgian navy study were counter to common expectation, we decided to subject the hypothesis to a more stringent test in a second experiment specifically designed for the purpose (Fiedler & Chemers, 1968).

The setting for this study was a leadership training workshop conducted for officers in charge of the leadership curriculum in military colleges of an allied nation.² The group consisted of 16 officers with rank of captain or major and with five to fifteen years of military and field experience. Moreover, with two exceptions (two invited U. S. officers), all officers were, themselves, graduates of military colleges.

The workshop involved several training exercises which required additional personnel. For this purpose 30 basic trainees were brought to the training site to participate in the exercises. These men were from 18 to 21 years of age. Their only previous military service consisted of an eight-week basic training course they had just completed.

A group vocabulary and information test was administered to all participants. This test, a measure of intelligence, indicated practically no overlap between the officers and enlisted men. Thus, the officer group was superior to the enlisted men not only in experience and training but also in intelligence as here measured. Moreover, the officers were more highly motivated to perform well than were the enlisted men to whom this was merely a mildly interesting change from their routine training. They were told that they were to work with civilian instructors on some training exercises, and all enlisted and commissioned personnel were instructed to come in civilian clothes.

The study consisted of two phases. The first involved three tasks, the second involved two tasks. Groups for the first phase (actually the second day's sessions) were assigned so that the officers led eight groups and the enlisted men led seven groups. The other two group members were assigned at random. Each group consisted of three men. To give each leader maximum experience the two members of each group rotated to a different leader after each task.

The groups were instructed that they were to perform three different tasks. The first task consisted of writing a recruiting letter, the second task involved finding the shortest route for a truck convoy, and the third task required that the group convert fictional score distributions, compute means, and draw bar graphs. The first and second tasks were, thus, almost identical to two of the tasks used in the Belgian navy study.

The recruiting letter was later judged by all officers and the inter-rater agreement, corrected for number of judges, was .98. The other two tasks yielded objective scores which merely required clerical checks to assure accuracy.

As in the Belgian navy study, we found no systematic difference between groups under the experienced and inexperienced leaders. This, to repeat an earlier point, despite the fact that the officers were clearly superior in intelligence to the enlisted men and despite their formal leadership training. The means and standard score for the three tasks are indicated on Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

On the subsequent day the groups worked on a fourth and fifth task. In contrast to the procedure used in the first three tasks, only the officers served as leaders of the three-man groups. The group members again changed leaders after the fourth task. This task involved the deciphering of two cryptograms. The fifth task consisted in drawing plans for barracks and an army compound to scale. Both of these two tasks could be scored objectively. The fourth by noting the number of letters correctly deciphered, the fifth by counting the number of lines which had been correctly drawn.³

The number of years of military experience of the officer-leader after graduation from military college was then correlated with group performance on each of the five tasks. These correlations were small and again insignificant, that is, .03, -.32, -.30, -.21 and .42 for the five tasks, respectively.

Tank Study

A third set of data was available from an experiment of 25 army tank crews. These crews were tested under carefully controlled conditions. The criteria of performance were based on the time it took the crew to travel, spot, and hit a given target (Fiedler, 1955).

In 20 of these crews the tank commanders were privates while five of the tank commanders ranged in rank from corporal to sergeant first class. The non-commissioned officers, as a group, undoubtedly had more leadership experience than did the privates most of whom had just recently completed tank crew training. The performance of crews led by non-commissioned officers was practically identical to those of crews led by non-rated enlisted men; in fact, the latter scored somewhat higher (497.50 vs. 485.00). In this group, therefore, leadership experience did not contribute to improved performance.

Limitation of Experiments

The Belgian navy and military academy studies can be subjected to several criticisms. First, these were artificial tasks, second the time to complete the tasks was short, and third, it could be questioned whether we would find similar results in real life. Let us discuss these one by one.

The objection that we are dealing with artificial situations goes, of course, to the heart of all laboratory procedures. The main rejoinder must be, however, that this was, indeed, a leadership situation involving motivated people.

If leadership experience is to be of value, it must surely be generalizable to different situations, that is, there must be some transfer of training. The two sets of experiments do not provide any evidence that the leadership training and experience in the real-life situation carried over into the more controlled experimental situations.

The second objection is that of limited time. One might argue that the short time allowed for the completion of these tasks did not enable the experienced leaders to assert or exercise their leadership skills. But one could argue with equal force that the leader who is experienced would be able to organize and marshall his group much more quickly than the inexperienced leader who still needs to think about each step.

The final question is, of course, not answerable by ad hoc experiments. It simply calls for data from field studies. Ideally, its examination requires certain prerequisites. First, the leaders must be in an organization in which the effective as well as the more marginal leaders are retained. Second, it must be an organization in which some men remain supervisors for

a relatively long time so that there will be a wide range of experience. Third, the supervisors must be in an organization in which jobs are sufficiently standardized so that adequate comparisons can be made.

The Post Office Study

A further extension of this inquiry to real life situations was possible in the context of research on post office management. The present data came from an investigation of 21 medium-sized post offices.⁴

The Post Office maintains a well-organized merit system. Candidates for position in management must pass a qualification test and they are then placed on a promotion list on the basis of their scores. The postmaster must make his choice from among the highest scoring candidates.

Promotion in the Post Office system is, however, extremely slow. The average tenure of post office foremen or first-level supervisors in our sample was 21 years. The range of supervisory experience of first-level supervisors extends over three decades.

Ratings from at least two, and usually three to five different higher level managers, were obtained which evaluated the performance of their subordinate supervisors. These evaluations showed considerable agreement over different raters (.86 and above). They concerned the individual's ability to supervise, his handling of personnel matters, and his technical competence.

The results of this analysis closely paralleled those obtained in the two experiments. Four of the five correlations between years of supervisory experience and rated performance were, in fact, negative (Table 3). This may well reflect the old-timer's disenchantment and lowered aspiration to perform well, or the feeling on the part of second and higher level managers

that the senior first-level supervisor is not as competent to handle his job and that he might, in fact, have peaked in his usefulness. To assure that these correlations are not biased by the possibility that the men near retirement might be less vigorous or capable, nor from new supervisors who might still be learning the ropes, we have recomputed the correlations for supervisors having from two to twelve years of experience. These correlations are also presented in Table 3. There might be some evidence that the old-timers are given lower ratings, but the correlations remain negative and insignificant.

 Insert Table 3 about here

Research, Industrial, and Business Organizations

A study by J. G. Hunt (1967) involved a number of different organizations for which appropriate performance measures were available.⁵ The groups and the criteria are here briefly described.

Research chemists. A sample of 18 chemical research teams was obtained from a large research organization. Some of these groups were in "pure research" others were in developmental work. The groups were evaluated by company officials above the first-line supervisor level who were familiar with the work of the chemistry division. Utilizing the Lamouria and Harrell (1963) technique, the supervisors were asked to (1) list and weigh the objectives of the division, (2) select the most important activities and weigh each of these in terms of their relative contribution to each objective, and (3) rate the performance of each individual group in terms of how well it had achieved each of the objectives. The estimated reliability of the ratings for three raters was .73.

Shop craftsmen. A sample of 11 shops in the same research organization was similarly assessed by company officials above the first line supervisory level. The groups were evaluated on (1) output quality and quantity considering the work conditions; (2) subordinate attitudes ascertained by informal means and number of grievances; and (3) overall evaluation considering the order in which the supervisors would be selected if the evaluators had their own businesses. Average rater intercorrelation was .86 with a corrected reliability of .92.

Meat markets and grocery departments. Data were available for 21 meat markets and for 24 grocery departments in a chain of supermarkets. The major measure evaluating the performance of the organizations is called Sales per Man-hour. This objective performance measure has been used by the supermarket chain as an important reflection of the manager's leadership ability. The manager can adjust manhours partially through the scheduling of part-time employees and partially through the facilitation of employee performance by motivation, training, etc. Data were available for 22 accounting periods of 28 days. The intraclass correlations across periods were .67 and .42 for the meat and grocery departments, corrected reliabilities were .98 and .94, respectively.

Heavy machinery production. Ten departments of a large heavy machinery plant were studied. The measure of performance was the percentage ratio of standard to actual time to complete a given amount of work. The standard was based on time studies. Average figures for each of three six-month periods were obtained. The intraclass intercorrelation for these three periods was .86, yielding a corrected reliability of .95.

Results. Two supervisor attributes were correlated with task group performance. These were the number of years of experience the supervisor had in the company and the number of years experience on the job. These results are listed in Table 4. As can be seen, not one of the 10 correlations even approaches significance, and the median correlation is .08.

Insert Table 4 about here

Discussion

Data from three experiments and 11 different sets of task group supervisors in five organizations tested the hypothesis that leadership and supervisory experience correlate with supervisory performance as measured by group effectiveness. A recapitulation of the findings based on 385 leaders is presented in Table 5. This table deletes the uninterpretable results of the Farm Supply study, and it lists the median correlations between leadership experience and group performance obtained in the Belgian navy study and the Military Academy studies since these data did not come from completely independent cases. The median of all correlations is -.12 which is in the direction contrary to the original hypothesis of this paper and contrary to the implicit assumptions which currently guide personnel actions in most organizations.

Insert Table 5 about here

The positive interpretation of these findings is, however, more difficult. As every statistics student knows, you cannot prove a null hypothesis. The studies here reported did not adequately sample every possible leadership situation. Moreover, the belief that leadership experience enhances performance is deeply ingrained and will not be easily shaken by "a few studies." A report of these data invariably arouse a storm of objections, usually prefaced with ". . . yes, but" In addition to the limitations of experiments already discussed above, let us now consider these further objections one by one.

1. "Yes, but did you control for halo effect"? That is, a man who is liked by his boss will be rated more favorably than someone who is disliked.

Halo effect would not account for results based on objective criteria, such as the studies of tank crews, meat and grocery departments, and the two experiments.

2. "Yes, but couldn't your data simply reflect that the good people get promoted and the poor ones get left behind"?

This would not account for the findings obtained in the Belgian navy and the military academy study which had leaders who had been chosen for their excellence. This was especially the case of the military academy officers who tend to be the pick of the crop.

3. "Yes, but the data might be curvilinear. The inexperienced leaders and the real oldtimers who are no longer in the swim might be the poorest."

There is some curvilinearity in the Post Office data when the entire distribution is taken into account. However, lopping off the men who have been supervisors for less than two years or more than ten years still leaves

us with insignificant correlations. In addition, plots were made of the data from the Hunt study involving the grocery and meat market managers and the directors of research laboratory teams or foremen of the heavy machinery plant. None of these plots suggested curvilinearity.

4. "Yes, but perhaps all the leadership that is learned is learned in the first few months or the first year."

This objection presupposes that some experience is important during the first few months but that additional experience will not add anything. This objection would not account for the results of the two experiments which compared experienced and completely inexperienced leaders, nor was there any difference in the tank crew study between privates and non-commissioned officers.

5. "Yes, but everybody has had some leadership experience, and this will be true even of supposedly inexperienced enlisted men."

But in this case leadership experience on the job is meaningless, and we don't have to worry about time in grade or experience in similar leadership positions.

6. "Yes, but were the leaders in the experiments highly motivated, were they working up to capacity"?

The petty officers in the Belgian navy study were significantly more motivated and answered significantly more positively to the question, "It was important that my team be among the best." The military academy officers likewise showed more concern for performing well than did the enlisted men.

7. "Yes, but should we not really expect negative correlations since, as Parkinson caustically said, a man gets promoted until he reaches a level

in the organization at which he is incompetent? Also, the good men leave or get promoted while the poor ones remain."

There is some evidence in support of this objection in the Post Office data. The group with longest supervisory experience did have lower effectiveness ratings. But this could certainly not be said of the military academy officers who were selected as "comers" nor the Belgian petty officers who ranged from the lowest to the highest petty officer rank. Moreover, there is no evidence of this type in other field data.

8. "Yes, but maybe the experience helps to create better morale."

The Belgian navy data indicated that the groups led by Petty Officers had higher group climate scores in two of the four tasks. This was not the case in the military academy study. There was slight evidence of this sort in the Post Office study, but not in the other groups. These ancillary results are, therefore, difficult to interpret.

* * * *

Many psychologists and personnel managers will probably find it hard to believe that leadership experience appears to have no salutary effect on group and organizational performances especially since supervisory experience and supervisory training are so often confounded. Yet, Alexander the Great at the age of 16 reportedly subdued an uprising of the Illyrian tribes and at the age of 18 commanded the Macedonian cavalry troops. Henry the Vth led the English forces to victory against Owen Glendower in Wales while he was still in his teens, and William Pitt became Prime Minister of England in his 24th year. Other more recent examples are Charles Percy who became president of Bell and Howell when he was 29, or Robert Hutchins who became president of the University of Chicago at the age of 30.

If a relationship between amount of leadership experience and performance does exist it is likely to be complex rather than simple. Such a finding would be in line with a number of recent leadership theories, among them the author's Contingency Model (Fiedler, 1967) which holds that group performance depends on leadership style as well as the favorableness of the leadership situation. Leadership experience will presumably make the situation more familiar, hence more favorable for the leader in terms of giving him more influence and control over his group. Some types of leaders might, therefore, perform more effectively in unfamiliar situations while others will perform better in situations in which they have had experience. Whether or not this explanation is correct remains to be seen. It is to be hoped, however, that this paper will spur interest in resolving some of the intriguing problems which these findings pose.

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Footnotes

1. Data for this paper were collected under Office of Naval Research Contract N6-ori-07135, and in part under ARPA Order No. 454, Nonr 1834(36), (Fred E. Fiedler and Harry C. Triandis, Principal Investigators).
2. The writer is indebted to Lt. Commander Allan Posthuma for permission to use the data reported in the military academy study.
3. As in other studies, leadership (or group) performance was uncorrelated over different tasks.
4. The Post Office data were collected in the course of research conducted by S. M. Nealey and the author.
5. My thanks to Dr. J. G. Hunt, now of the Southern Illinois University, for permission to use his data.

Table 1
Mean Task Performance (In Standard Scores) of Groups
Led by Belgian Navy Petty Officers and Recruits.

<u>Task</u>	<u>Leader of Group</u>	
	<u>Petty Officer</u>	<u>Recruit</u>
Recruiting Letter	50.81*	49.21
Convoy Route I	49.84	49.67
Convoy Route II	49.47	50.33
Pistol Assembly	50.76	49.24

Note: None of the differences was statistically significant.

*Higher T-score indicates better performance.

Table 2
Comparison of Mean Productivity Scores for Three Tasks
for Groups Led by Officers and Enlisted Men

Task	Officers	Enlisted Men	t	p
Fable	9.30*	11.72	0.38	NS
Routing Problem	70.12	66.33*	0.32	NS
Bar Graphs	18.75**	13.86	0.77	NS

*Lower score indicates higher productivity.

**Higher score indicates higher productivity.

Table 3
Correlations between Length of Service in Present Position
and Rated Performance of Supervisors at Various
Levels in 21 Post Offices

Level	<u>All Ss</u>		<u>Ss where 1 Yr. \leq Service \leq 10 Yr.</u>	
	N	r	N	r
Assistant Postmaster	19	-.53*	8	-.03
Superintendent of Mails	20	-.13	17	-.22
Asst. Supt. of Mails	19	-.12	17	.09
Second-level Supervisors	23	.24	14	.22
First-level Supervisors	180	-.13	137	.03

*p < .05

Table 4
Correlation between Years of Managerial Experience
and Group Performance

	<u>Research Organization</u>		<u>Supermarket Chain</u>		<u>Heavy Machinery</u>
	Research Chemists N = 18	Shop Craftsman N = 11	Meat Depts. N = 21	Grocery Depts. N = 24	Production Depts. N = 10
Number of Years with Company	.112	-.285	.079	.195	-.142
Number of Years on the Job	.119	-.280	.088	.327	-.178

None are significant ($p < .05$).

Table 5
Correlations between Years of Experience
and Group Performance

	<u>Correlation Coefficient</u>	<u>N</u>
Belgian Navy Study (.08, .13, -.05, .12)	.10*	24
Military Academy Study (.03, -.32, -.30, -.21, .42)	-.21*	16
Assistant Postmasters	-.53*	19
Superintendents of Mail	-.13	20
Asst. Supts. of Mail	-.12	19
Second-Level Supervisors	.24	23
First-Level Supervisors	-.13	180
Research Chemists	.12	18
Craft Shop Foremen	-.28	11
Meat Department Managers	.09	21
Grocery Department Managers	.33	24
Production Department Foremen	-.18	10
Median Correlation	-.12	385

*Median correlations are listed since the correlations were not computed on completely independent cases.

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13. ABSTRACT

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